

SHS (DES MOINES) COURTESY ABRAMOWITZ CREATIVE STUDIOS



The Iowa Battle Flags Project

by Bill Johnson

Perhaps you were once among the thousands and thousands of visitors to the state capitol who peered into the glass cases at nearly 200 faded and fragile battle flags crammed inside. Some were bundled together with once-lustrous silk cord and tassels. Other bundles were pierced by wire, staples, or screws. Corroded pins held paper labels on brittle silk. The flags leaned against each other like weary old soldiers.

Most of the flags were carried to the capitol on August 10, 1894, in a mile-long procession of Civil War veterans "with unsteady steps and tear dimmed eyes." A governor's proclamation and legislative action had directed that flags "borne by Iowa regiments and batteries during the war of the rebellion" be preserved and displayed in the capitol. Many of

the flags had been in the possession of the adjutant general for years, and on Battle Flag Day they were retrieved from the arsenal in Des Moines. Others came from the collections of the State Historical Society and from the hands of regimental members, who had lovingly preserved them over the years.

The flags "looked weird and somber in the bright sunlight as though they had come from another world," a reporter noted, "and brought back to the minds of the veterans as nothing else could the solemnity of the occasion. It was a scene which never occurred before and never will again."

General J. W. Noble acknowledged in his speech that the violence of battles and the passage of time had taken a considerable toll on the flags:

"At one time they gleamed in the sunlight fresh and beautiful, their colors as bright as the flowers of the prairies." He continued, "On their silken folds are inscribed the names of the many battles in which they have been borne. . . . Those names are crumbling with decay."

The flags were being placed in "shrines of safety," Noble said, and it is clear that the legislature believed that with this action, the flags were permanently taken care of, because no government agency was given the authority or appropriations to further manage and preserve the collection.

For decades, the battle flags were a key element of public tours of the statehouse. And for decades, the flags continued to deteriorate. By today's standards, the glass display cases in the rotunda were not adequately

sealed from dust and other contaminants, including cigarette smoke and grease and smoke from the capitol kitchen below. The lights installed along the cases in 1905 to illuminate the flags did additional damage (we now know that light is one of the most destructive forces on fabric). Sometimes a particular flag was temporarily removed by a Grand Army of the Republic post for ceremonial use. When it was returned to the case, pollen, dust, and other contaminants might have accompanied it.

Flags from the Spanish-American War were added to the rotunda displays in 1908, and after World War I, a case was added for flags of that conflict. In the 1970s the Iowa adjutant general decided to try to preserve the flags, but the process was too costly, and only four were treated. The flags remained in the cases for another two decades.

In the late 1990s, in response to concerns expressed by several organizations and private citizens, the Iowa Battle Flag Preservation Committee was formed to investigate preservation efforts. In 1999, the General Assembly provided \$50,000 to conduct a study. The next year Fonda Thompsen, a nationally known flag conservator, presented her findings and recommendations to the State Historical Society of Iowa, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs, which submitted the report to

the legislature. Supported by the legislature and governor, funding was established for the Iowa Battle Flags Project and continues as part of the annual infrastructure legislation. (In addition, the conservation of five flags in 2005 was funded by a grant from Save America's Treasures and international and state Questers study clubs.)

In January 2001, the staff of the State Historical Society museum began the transfer of the first group of flags from the capitol to the State Historical Building one block west. Through the generous help of the Heartland Regional Council of Carpenters and the apprentice program of Carpenters Local 106, an enclosure was built in the rotunda. This provided a place to prepare the flags for transfer and gave the public a glimpse of the process.

The flags were removed with the same dignity in which they had been delivered a century ago. Dressed in period uniforms, Civil War reenactors of the 24th and 15th Iowa regiments, and Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, served as an honor guard. With some anxiety and great effort, the century-old glass door of the display case was swung upward, releasing the smell of stale air. Slowly, the staff unbound the bundles of flags. Each movement of air or touch of hand sent particles of cotton gauze or

silken flag drifting down. As each flag was brought out from the case, it was enveloped in acid-free materials and transported to the Society's conservation laboratory for treatment. (Follow the intricate stabilization steps on the following pages.)

The Iowa Battle Flags Project is an ambitious, long-term undertaking. The process is tedious and challenging, and it requires skilled hands. Meticulous records are kept at each step. Meanwhile, historical research is conducted regarding the flags and the military units associated with them. Each flag takes weeks to stabilize. Only then will it be considered for public exhibition, which is limited to six months to minimize exposure to light. Cases in the capitol rotunda are being retrofitted with climate and light controls, as part of the capitol restoration.

More than 230 flags (from the capitol and State Historical Society collections) are being conserved, one flag at a time. For the Civil War flags alone, current estimates indicate that stabilization will require ten years. ❖

Bill Johnson is the museum curator of battle flags at the State Historical Society of Iowa.

Rally 'Round the Flags

• *Tour the Iowa Battle Flags Conservation Laboratory at the State Historical Building, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines. Reservations are required. Tours are on the third Saturday of each month and begin at 1:30 p.m. The project conservator and project historian lead the hour-and-a-half tour. Groups are limited to ten. Must be age ten or older. \$20 per person (10 percent discount for members). For tour reservations, call 515-*

283-1757, or e-mail museum.store@iowa.gov.

• *Adopt A Flag. Individuals, groups, and businesses are invited to select and help fund a flag's conservation. Donor levels begin at \$500 with increasing benefits. For information on Adopt A Flag, call 515-281-5111; e-mail sheila.hanke@iowa.gov.*

• *For a complete understanding of the Iowa Battle*

Flags Project and more photos, explore this Website: www.iowaFlags.org.

• *Purchase the colorful battle flags poster at the Museum Store in the State Historical Building. Proceeds benefit the Battle Flags Project.*

• *Watch for more stories about the flags in upcoming issues of this magazine.*